

New and notable bird records for Burkina Faso

by ¹Michiel VAN DEN BERGH

African Studies Centre at Leiden and Vogelbescherming Nederland,
Nieuwezijdse Voorburgwal 344, NL-1012rx Amsterdam, The Netherlands
<michielvdbbergh@hotmail.com>

Received 25 June 2012; revised 28 January 2013.

Summary

Several bird records obtained in Burkina Faso during the period December 2011 to Mar 2012 are described, including the first record of Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* for the country and the first fully-documented records of Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, Quail-plover *Ortyxelos meiffreni* and Little Crake *Porzana parva*. Observations relating to the status in Burkina Faso of Great Snipe *Gallinago media*, Blackstart *Cercomela melanura*, Green-headed Sunbird *Cyanomitra verticalis*, and Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus* are also described.

Résumé

Nouvelles et remarquables observations d'oiseaux pour le Burkina Faso. Plusieurs observations d'oiseaux obtenues au Burkina Faso au cours de la période de décembre 2011 à mars 2012 sont décrites, dont la première observation du Bécasseau tacheté *Calidris melanotos* pour le pays et les premières observations bien documentées du Butor étoilé *Botaurus stellaris*, du Turnix à ailes blanches *Ortyxelos meiffreni* et de la Marouette poussin *Porzana parva*. Sont aussi décrites des observations ayant trait au statut au Burkina Faso de la Bécassine double *Gallinago media*, du Traquet à queue noire *Cercomela melanura*, du Souimanga à tête verte *Cyanomitra verticalis* et du Pouillot ibérique *Phylloscopus ibericus*.

Introduction and methods

I made bird observations while on a visit to Burkina Faso from 12 December 2011 to 9 March 2012, including in three main areas: urban Ouagadougou, the extensive wetlands of the Sourou River Basin (primarily in Di and Lanfiera Departments) and the predominantly dry Sahelian landscape of Lac Higa (mainly in Tankougounadié Department). On many days the first and/or last hour(s) of the day were used for

birdwatching. Additionally, a four-day trip was made to the southwest of the country, including Lac Tengrela, La Guinguette and Cascades de Karfiguela, around the end of 2011. During this period I obtained several remarkable bird records for Burkina Faso, as described in this article.

Results

***Botaurus stellaris* Great Bittern.** I observed and photographed several Great Bitterns between Dec and Feb, including one at Lac de Tengrela (10.64685°N, 4.83789°W) on 30 Dec and up to four birds in the same rice and reed field (13.02554°N, 3.44549°W) in the Sourou River Basin near Lanfiera in the last week of Jan (Fig. 1). One or more Great Bitterns were also seen at several other locations in the Sourou River Basin, but all within a few km of the above-mentioned rice-reed field. There appear to be no published records of this species for Burkina Faso, although it is a rare winter visitor to West Africa, with records in most neighbouring countries (Borrow & Demey 2004). However, it is included on the country's unpublished national list (NATURAMA *in litt.*), based on its rare occurrence in Burkina Faso (G.H. Oueda pers. comm.). However, the photographs reported here constitute the first confirmation of the species in the country (R. Demey pers. comm.).



Figure 1. Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, Sourou River Basin, Lanfiera Department, Burkina Faso, 27 Feb 2012.

***Ortyxelos meiffrenii* Quail-plover.** Two Quail-plovers were flushed in the Lac Higa area, near the road between Sebba and Tankougounadié (c. 13.46667°N, 0.587811°E) on the evening of 2 Feb. About an hour later, around dusk, one bird appeared in the open and started to forage on a small piece of fallow land < 5 m from the observer. Photographs (Fig. 2A) and video were taken of this bird. The habitat was a mixture of small patches of low woodland, bushes, tall grasses and open fallow lands, in the distance on the right of Fig. 2B. The species is regarded as locally uncommon in the far northern and eastern corners of Burkina Faso (Borrow & Demey 2004), but these photographs appear to constitute the first proof of the species for the country.



Figure 2. Quail-plover *Ortyxelos meiffreni*, 2 Feb 2012 (A), between Sebba and Tankougounadié (B), Tankougounadié Department, Burkina Faso.

***Porzana parva* Little Crane.** At least two Little Crakes were seen (a male and female) and heard singing around dusk on three evenings during the period 23 Feb to

1 Mar, in the Sourou River Basin between Bousse and Lanfiera (13.04831°N, 3.45400°W). Both birds were notably small, with green legs and a green-yellowish bill with a red base (ruling out the similar Baillon's Crake *P. pusilla*). The male was blue-grey below with hardly any banding on its belly, while the female showed a light brown to whitish belly: all features of Little Crake rather than Baillon's Crake. They moved around secretively in a small marshy area (c. 100 x 200 m), which included a shallow pond surrounded by high reeds and some lower wet grassy areas, all within a somewhat drier area but within the vast wetlands of the Sourou River Basin. According to Borrow & Demey (2004), this species has not been recorded in Burkina Faso, although it is a rare winter visitor to Niger just across the border. Thus, this is the first published record for Burkina Faso. However, the species is included on the country's national list (NATURAMA *in litt.*), as rare or vagrant. Borrow & Demey (2004) note that Little Crakes are largely silent in winter quarters, but I heard a male singing (a short repeated nasal *kua*, repeated with increasing speed, the ending pitched lower and almost in a stutter) several times on two evenings at the above-mentioned location.

***Gallinago media* Great Snipe.** Although this species is apparently an uncommon or rare winter migrant in south-central Burkina Faso (Borrow & Demey 2004), at least five birds were present (at least two different individuals photographed: see Fig. 3A) in one fallow rice field (13.0108°N, 3.43971°W) in the Sourou River Basin near Lanfiera on 29 Feb, and one or two more were seen nearby (Fig. 3B), while four days earlier one Great Snipe was seen in almost the same area. This number of birds is noteworthy considering the species' general rarity and unobtrusive behaviour (Cramp 1983; Borrow & Demey 2004). On 30 Dec, one was also seen and heard when flushed at close range at Lac de Tengrela (10.64685°N, 4.83789°W).

***Calidris melanotos* Pectoral Sandpiper.** In the late afternoon of 8 Mar, I observed a Pectoral Sandpiper feeding among several other species of waders on Barrage 2 (12.39003°N, 1.53819°W; Fig. 4), one of Ouagadougou's three water reservoirs. At the end of the dry season (Feb–May) these reservoirs partly dry out and expose some large mudflats, which attract large concentrations of waders. The bird was identified as a Pectoral Sandpiper by a combination of: medium-sized sandpiper (similar in size to Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*: Fig. 4A) with a medium-length slightly decurved bill with paler base, yellow-greenish legs and a finely but distinctly streaked breast sharply demarcated from a white belly. The similar Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata* has not been recorded in West Africa, but was ruled out by the abrupt junction between the streaked breast and white belly, and by the less pronounced white eyebrow (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Swenson *et al.* 2010: Fig. 4A). The bird showed a fairly clear “V” across mantle and scapulars (Fig. 4B), created by paler, narrow fringes, which, in combination with the quite fine streaking on the buffish breast, indicates that the bird must have been an immature or first-year bird (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). Post-juvenile moult starts in the winter quarters, but some juvenile feathers are retained until the following complete post-breeding moult (Cramp 1983). The next day the bird was easily relocated among the thousands of other waders,

sometimes associating with the numerous Wood Sandpipers. This represents the first record of a Pectoral Sandpiper for Burkina Faso (NATURAMA *in litt.*).



Figure 3. Great Snipe *Gallinago media*, 29 Feb 2012 (A), in the Sourou River Basin (B), Lanfiera Department, Burkina Faso.

Pectoral Sandpiper breeds in the coastal tundra of Siberia, Alaska and northwest Canada, and winters in coastal and inland wetlands in southern South America, and in smaller numbers in southeast Australia and New Zealand, with a few perhaps migrating via Europe to spend the non-breeding season in Africa (Cramp 1983, Hoyo *et al.* 1996, Chandler 2009). Hagemeyer & Blair (1997) and Snow & Perrins (1998) report an apparent westward expansion recently to the western Palearctic.



Figure 4. Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, (A) on right, with Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola*, (B) lower right, with Wood Sandpipers and Common Greenshank *T. nebularia*, at Barrage 2 (C), Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 8 Mar 2012.

Pectoral Sandpiper is an annual vagrant in Europe and has been recorded as a vagrant in Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, São Tomé e Príncipe and Gabon, but all records were along or near the coast. This record seems to be the furthest inland in West Africa (Borrow & Demey 2004, Swenson *et al.* 2010).

***Cercomela melanura* Blackstart.** Two Blackstarts were observed on an inselberg near the Niger border in the Tankougounadié Department in Aug 2011 (Bergh 2012). This was the first record of Blackstart for Burkina Faso. Probably the same two birds were still present during Jan–Feb 2012 in the same area (13.57214°N, 0.72902°E), where one male was heard singing on several occasions. Also, one bird was seen entering a small hole in a cliff (a potential breeding location: see Cramp 1983) and staying in for almost a minute. However, no Blackstart was seen entering this hole on a second visit.

***Phylloscopus ibericus* Iberian Chiffchaff.** During the morning of 13 Dec, an Iberian Chiffchaff was heard and seen singing for a prolonged period in Ouagadougou Classified Forest (Parc Bangre Weogo, 12.39712°N, 1.48813°W). The identification was mainly based on the voice which perfectly matched that of Iberian Chiffchaff (two or three series, each 2–5 s long, of differently pitched whistles, each series of 1–5 notes quickly repeated) followed by short soft *prrr* calls similar to those of Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita*, but with no Common Chiffchaff elements in the rest of its song. This was supported by plumage characters: brightly coloured bird, green above and white below (no brown tinge), yellow under-tail coverts, head sides with yellowish wash, very distinct supercilium, bill appearing rather long. Two other possible Iberian Chiffchaffs were heard at Lac de Tengrela (30 Dec, 10.64716°N, 4.83665°W), and at Koubri (1 Feb, 12.21897°N, 1.31634°W). These birds were seen and heard too briefly to ensure positive identification. There is only a handful of records in West Africa, including one in Burkina Faso (Borrow & Demey 2004).

***Cyanomitra verticalis* Green-headed Sunbird.** A male Green-headed Sunbird was present in Ouagadougou Classified Forest (Parc Bangre Weogo, 12.39137°N, 1.49547°W) from at least 13 until 16 Dec. Several photographs of the bird were obtained on the first day (Fig. 5). In Burkina Faso this species is only known to occur in the southwest, where several records have been obtained by B. Portier (pers. comm.), Pavia *et al.* (2012) and myself, including one at La Guinguette on 29 Dec 2011 (c. 11.18686°N, 4.44468°W) and two at Cascades de Karfiguela on 30 Dec 2011 (10.72364°N, 4.82211°W; in the trees on the left of Fig. 5D). According to Borrow & Demey (2004) there is also one record of this species in southeast Burkina Faso.

Acknowledgments

I thank Max Berlijn for his comments regarding the Pectoral Sandpiper's recent westward expansion, and Marco Pavia and Bruno Portier (the referees) for their

interesting and useful comments. My gratitude also goes to the late Georges H. Oueda (NATURAMA), who sadly passed away recently, for giving comments regarding the status of some of the species in Burkina Faso.



Figure 5. Green-headed Sunbird *Cyanomitra verticalis* (A–C), in Parc Bangre Weogo, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 13 Dec 2011, and locality of the record at the Cascades de Karfiguela (D), Burkina Faso, 30 Dec 2011.

References

BERGH, M. VAN DEN (2012) First record of Blackstart *Cercomela melanura* for Burkina Faso. *Bull. Afr. Bird Club* 19: 202–203.

- BORROW, N. & DEMEY, R. (2004) *Birds of Western Africa*. Christopher Helm, London.
- CHANDLER, R. (2009) *Shorebirds of the Northern Hemisphere*. Christopher Helm, London.
- CRAMP, S. (ed.) (1983) *Handbook of the Birds of Europe the Middle East and North Africa; the Birds of the Western Palearctic*, vol. 3. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- HOYO, J. DEL, ELLIOTT, A. & SARGATAL, J. (eds.) (1996) *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, vol. 3. Lynx, Barcelona.
- HAGEMEIJER, E.J.M. & BLAIR, M.J. (eds) (1997) *The EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds: their Distribution and Abundance*. Poyser, London.
- HAYMAN, P., MARCHANT, J. & PRATER, T. (1986) *Shorebirds; an Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*. Croom Helm, Australia.
- KEITH, S., URBAN, E.K. & FRY, C.H. (eds) (1986) *The Birds of Africa*, vol. 2. Academic Press, London.
- PAVIA, M., BOANO, G., SILVANO, F. & MAMADOU, K. (2012) New bird records from southwestern Burkina Faso. *Malimbus* 34: 57–70.
- SNOW, D.W. & PERRINS, C.M. (1998) *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, vol. 2. Oxford University Press, New York.
- SWENSON, L., GRANT, P.J., MULLARNEY, K. & ZETTERSTRÖM, D. (2010) *ANWB Vogelgids van Europa*. ANWB, Den Haag.